Indigenous Studies and Academic English in Relation: Teaching Research Writing to First-Year International Students on Musqueam Land

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Version January 10, 2019

Introduction

Each year since 2014, the University of British Columbia (UBC) has welcomed a new group of international students to the recently created Vantage College. Fully integrated into UBC, Vantage College is a first-year, cohort-based program with intensive language support—the only one of its kind in North America. The students are international students—the majority of them from mainland China—who are admitted on their academic accomplishments but who do not yet fully meet UBC’s English language requirements and who receive integrated language support in their first year so as to better assure success in their subsequent years of study. Vantage College has 4 streams for different bachelor programs: an Arts, a Science, an Applied Science, and a Management stream (see figure 1).
In the Arts stream—where both authors work—some of the instructors who teach courses in academic English, writing studies, political science, geography, history, and sociology have collaborated on integrating material on Indigenous land, history, and politics in our instruction. UBC is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. In 2006, UBC recognized the unique relationship with the Indigenous communities on whose lands it is located in Memoranda of Affiliation (The University of British Columbia), and since 2009 it has had an Indigenous Strategic Plan (originally called Aboriginal Strategic Plan, the new and renamed version was developed under a new university president). Numerous initiatives in all areas of university work have preceded and accompanied these high-level administrative efforts that are directed at building and maintaining good relations with local Indigenous communities and their knowledge. Our project asks, how should such relations shape the work of teaching first-year international students? And more broadly, how can our practice in academic language and writing instruction be modified and positioned to aid in decolonizing higher education?

In this project we lay out how instructing international students in local and international Indigenous issues can be located at a productive intersection with the teaching of academic English and academic writing. In Vantage College Arts, there are two sets of faculty who provide language and writing courses (see figure 2)—instructors in Vantage College’s own Academic English Program (AEP) and instructors who teach writing studies courses that are offered at UBC to students across several faculties by Arts Studies in Research and Writing (ASRW). Both sets of instructors deliver academic English courses with approaches that emphasize explicit use of metalanguage. In the genesis of the Vantage Arts program, the
metalanguage approaches were set out well before the Indigenous studies materials were developed, and we will introduce these approaches in that order before analyzing and theorizing their productive intersection with teaching Indigenous studies.

Figure 2. Sample syllabi from an AEP and an ASRW instructor.

Language & Writing Instruction at Vantage College

In Vantage College Arts, AEP instructors with expertise in teaching English as an additional language run courses and tutorials that provide integrated language support. This form of support is unique to Vantage College and is not offered to any other students at UBC. In contrast, ASRW instructors who teach first-year writing studies courses also offer the same or similar courses to several thousand other students each year. Both those groups of instructors take pride in the innovative and research-based approaches they use; approaches shared by instructors in each group come from different but related traditions of language and writing instruction.

The Vantage College AEP program approach English with a functional view on grammar that is based on research in systemic functional linguistics (SFL). SFL understands language as a system of functional choices in order to then teach how these choices play out differently in different contexts and genres (Duff et. al; Halliday and Matthiessen; Biber and Conrad). SFL approaches to teaching academic English present the language choices that are inherent in research discourse in explicit and scaffolded ways and support students’ need to acquire the linguistic resources that produce this discourse. These resources include linguistic metalanguage
that helps students categorize, and thereby see, functional units of language and then analyze, practice, and creatively use those patterns in their own speech and writing.

The writing studies faculty in Vantage College come from research backgrounds in English language and literary studies and employ genre-based pedagogy (Hyland) in their courses. Genre-based pedagogy highlights how academic genres do the work of research and perform social actions within research environments, how these genres are situated in the context of disciplinary communities, and how their formal characteristics shift between different purposes and disciplines. In this view, genres and their forms are shaped and associated with the situations in which they perform social action (Bitzer; Miller; Bawarshi). These courses combine genre move analysis and its attention to how sentences work together to perform complex moves (Swales), with applied language studies’ more detailed attention to how choices of words and phrases signal positions and turns in argument. The latter approach is particularly fruitful for Vantage College students because it links closely with terms introduced in AEP courses, and because it is tied to specific words and phrases, a level of analysis which is very familiar to EAL students.

For both types of approaches, metalanguage is part of the process of transferring knowledge that was gained in a class dedicated to academic English or writing to the diverse research and writing settings students will encounter in their subsequent work. When students enter new and different discursive situations after they have taken courses that teach language-focused study of academic discourse, their knowledge of metalanguage will help them adapt. Metalanguage supports the analysis of new situations and the production of new genres by knowledgeably connecting elements of the new situation and texts to previously encountered situations and texts. In its emphasis on analysis of academic discourse with the help of applied language concepts (see figures 3 and 4), the teaching of academic literacy at Vantage College thus builds confidently on the detailed analyses and situated approaches developed by years scholarship in writing studies and English for academic purposes (Jordan; Casanave; Paré; Duff et al.).
Figure 3. Metalanguage highlighted in a syllabus for an academic English course.

Among the goals of teaching metalanguage is that these terms help students to recognize patterns of language use in current scholarship. Providing students with the metalanguage that enables them to conduct their own study of usage patterns in academic English opens their eyes to how different genres mobilize language features as well as how different disciplines...
have developed varying patterns of language use within those genres. When it comes to the point in our courses where we study Indigenous scholarship with the students, students are thus more alert to the language choices which Indigenous scholars make in their research writing. More specifically, one way in which Indigenous scholarship distinguishes itself from scholarship in other fields is in its preferable referencing of Indigenous scholars, including through the use of modifiers that mark Indigenous identity. Another language aspect we draw students' attention to are the changing political currencies of certain terms and the fast rate by which vocabulary in Indigenous studies gets revised and updated. We also speak about how deliberate verb choices and the naming of agents are in historical and political descriptions in Indigenous studies scholarship.

Our attention to scholars' differential use of language resources also opens the floor for a consideration of students' own identity and positionality when working with Indigenous studies material and scholarship. Here, students practice the expression of self-location in their own writing, the critical positioning of their project and its claims, and the use of evaluating expressions in relation to cited materials and topics addressed.

[More detailed discussion of teaching materials we developed. Examples of how we analyzed specific samples of Indigenous scholarship with students.]

**Language Choices in Indigenous Studies Scholarship**

The integration of Indigenous studies material in the Vantage College curriculum has added an important layer to academic language learning. In the Vantage College Arts stream, some of the teaching of linguistic resources for academic speech and writing has been expanded to include language choices made in current writing by Indigenous scholars. In doing so, we are pushing both systemic functional linguistics and rhetorical genre theory into new realms for research and teaching practice.

We want to note here that pedagogical use of SFL as described by Sydney School linguists David Rose and J.R. Martin has, historically, been grounded in the need to change the teaching of reading and writing for the benefit of, in their case, Australian Indigenous students. Rose and Martin's 2012 book *Learning to Write, Reading to Learn* positions SFL language teaching as more effective than traditional or constructivist approaches in successfully counteracting unequal educational outcomes among Aboriginal and migrant children. Rose and Martin show that *explicit* instruction with the use appropriate linguistic metalanguage is particularly helpful for students whose culturally different reading and meaning-making practices put them in a disadvantaged position when *implicit* forms of literacy instruction are favoured. However, despite their proximity to questions of Western educational attainment among Indigenous students, Rose and Martin do not seem to consider opening their SFL curriculum in such a way
that language resources and genre structures used by Indigenous writers are included in these analyses and this form of teaching.

This is the area of research into which we venture with our pedagogical work: 1) to help students recognize the patterns of language use in current scholarship on Indigenous studies as well as 2) discern how to use these language resources depending on one’s own identity position in relation to the topics one writes about.

**Critical Questions**

[Caution is built into our approach—Vantage College does not have Indigenous instructors, we clarify our own positioning and guide students in theirs; we center Indigenous scholars in our choice of materials; we build relations with Indigenous scholars on campus]

**Conclusion**

This project reports on a pedagogical innovation in-progress. More specifically, it showcases how working with students on disciplinary language patterns—in the way that the field of English for academic purposes advocates—provides a partial pathway toward decolonizing language and writing support in writing centres as well as in writing studies or EAP courses. Vantage College’s work in this area has lead to new institutional partnerships, including a large-scale project with members of the program in Indigenous studies that aims to provide more widely available educational resources on Indigenous contexts and histories for international students.

**Works Cited**


Bio: Katja Thieme teaches at UBC in Arts Studies in Research and Writing, Vantage College, and in the English Department. Her research is located in the field of rhetorical genre theory. She is particularly interested in how written genres constitute movements, and how these genres change. Most recently she has investigated such change, with collaborator Shurli Makmillen, in a study of writing assignments in courses with Indigenous studies content. She has taught many UBC undergraduate students how to produce and analyze research writing and is an avid proponent of genre-based pedagogy.